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Xenophon and the Boeotian Helmet

By A. D. FRASER

IN his treatise known under the title of *Hippike* or *The Art of Horsemanship*, the historian Xenophon, writing towards the close of a busy and adventurous life, furnishes the Greek cavalryman with much expert advice drawn from his long experience as a professional soldier. No small part of the essay is concerned with the question of the choice of a proper mount, after which the matter of defensive armor for the knight is examined. Passing from one feature of this armor to another, Xenophon presently recommends a certain form of cavalry-helmet in the following terms: κράνος γε μὴν κράτιστον εἶναι νομίζομεν τὸ βοιωτιουργές· τοῦτο γὰρ αὖ στεγάζει μάλιστα πάντα τὰ ὑπερέχοντα τοῦ θώρακος, ὅρᾱν δὲ οὐ κωλύει (xii. 3).

From this brief notice he passes on to consider other matters.

We have here a specific reference to some sort of a Boeotian helmet. What was it? While it would be too much to say that an actual controversy has arisen over the point, we have to acknowledge that no very satisfactory answer has ever been returned to the questions that suggest themselves. Just what is the Boeotian helmet? Have specimens of it survived? Or have any representations of it been preserved in Hellenic art? The subject, indeed, has never been thoroughly investigated; the main attempts at identification of the helmet may here be noted.

By reason of the renowned Thebes having been the chief city of Boeotia in ancient times, several scholars have been led to recognize the Boeotian helmet of Xenophon in certain representations of helmets possessing Theban traits or associations. In the Duc de Luynes collection of pottery in the Bibliothèque Nationale, a scene appears on a cylix¹

¹*Archæolog. Zeit.*, xi (1853), pl. 52, 3; p. 20 f.

in which an athlete is portrayed wearing a helmet of the lighter so-called Attic model (Fig. 1). The headpiece is somewhat frail and diminutive, and from it there arises a long, slightly projecting neck which terminates in an eagle's head with long ears like a griffin's or, better, dragon's head—the whole forming a sort of crest, apparently some two feet in height. The specific association of this helmet with Boeotia is not entirely certain; but even if we grant the connection, it is quite obvious that the helmet would be utterly useless on the field of battle. Rather, it belongs to the category of parade or "show" helmets which we know were worn upon occasion in triumphal processions.¹ This type is well illustrated in the helmet which the goddess Athena wears in the paintings on the Panathenaic amphoræ. Furthermore, a glance at the scene on the cylix makes it clear that the casque is being presented to the athlete as a meed of victory in one of the Hellenic games.

Panofka, who is the author of the attribution to Thebes of the helmet already discussed, associates with it the helmets in two scenes, which he discusses in the *Archæologische Zeitung*.² The first of these represents a youth, presumably Theban, sinking to the ground under the paws of a sphinx (Fig. 2). He wears a head-covering of simple design, of essentially the form of the well known *pilos* (Fig. 6), with narrow rim and a small knob-like projection above. The second scene depicts, among other figures, three youths who are conversing with a sphinx (Fig. 3). They are equipped with caps which conform in general to the shape of the *pilos*, but have a peculiarly scalloped rim and appear to be so moulded as, in each case, to fit the contour of the head of the wearer. This certainly suggests the use of some flexible material, presumably skin, so that the cap could be pulled down over the head after the fashion of the oriental turban. Hence, it has been suggested by Overbeck³ that we may have here an example of the "Boeotian *κυνῆ*," or dogskin cap. A bonnet of almost identical form appears on the slab from Pella in Macedonia,

¹Dion. Halicarn., *De Demosth.*, 32.

²xii (1854), p. 189 f.

³Overbeck, *Die Bildwerke zum thebischen und troischen Heldenkreis*, p. 42.



FIG. 1—PARIS, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE: INTERIOR OF CYLIX FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE DUC DE LUYNES (AFTER *Arch. Zeit.*, 1853, pl. LII, 3)



FIG. 2—BERLIN, ALTES MUSEUM: GEM (AFTER OVERBECK, *Die Bildwerke zum thebischen und troischen Heldenkreis*, pl. I, 8)



FIG. 3—SCENE FROM A VASE FORMERLY IN THE HAMILTON COLLECTION, LATER IN THE HOPE COLLECTION, AND SOLD TO F. PARTRIDGE (AFTER OVERBECK, *Die Bildwerke zum thebischen und troischen Heldenkreis*, pl. II, 2)

preserved in the Constantinople Museum, which portrays a youthful warrior wearing a cylindrical cap of about this form.¹

Furthermore, the Boeotian helmet described by Xenophon is considered by Overbeck and Furtwängler² to be represented in the style worn by the Theban warriors on the western frieze of the temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis at Athens, where the scene depicted is in all probability the battle of Plataea, where the men of Thebes supported the Persians. Here we have a type which does not differ radically from those already cited—a conical cap, not unlike the *cabasset* of mediæval times. Friederichs, however, has presented conclusive evidence to show that this type of head-protection is by no mean distinctive of Boeotia.³

It seems, then, perfectly safe to reject the above theories of the Boeotian helmet for the following reasons: The first type would be entirely useless on the field of battle, whether worn by mounted man or footsoldier. Panofka's other helmets are apparently but *piloi* and leathern caps. Also, the occurrence of the latter style of headgear on the coins of Thessaly shows that it was not specifically Boeotian. The helmets of the warriors on the temple of Athena Nike find duplicates frequently on Macedonian coins.⁴ Indeed, we have abundant evidence from sculpture, coins, gems, vase-paintings, and terracottas that such *piloi*—for the above types correspond closely enough with the definition of the term to admit of their being classed under this one head—were in common use throughout the entire Hellenic world. Even apart from this, they may with perfect safety be dismissed from the present consideration on the ground that they fail to tally with the description of Xenophon's helmet—"one which protects most efficiently all parts of the person above the cuirass, without obstructing the view of the wearer" (*Hippike loc. cit.*). The *pilos* protects the skull from above the glabella to the region of the external

¹Collignon, *Hist. Sculpt.*, i, fig. 157.

²Furtwängler, *Masterp. Sculpt.*, p. 446, note 4.

³Bausteine, p. 189 (= Friederichs-Wolters, p. 283).

⁴*Cf.*, e. g., *Brit. Mus. Cat., Maced.*, p. 9.

occipital protuberance only, and altogether fails to guard the greater portion of the face and neck.

So far as I have been able to discover, but two writers of antiquity, other than Xenophon, make mention of the Boeotian helmet. These are both late authors and add nothing of a material nature to our knowledge. Julius Pollux, in the *Onomasticon* (i. 149), mentions the κράνος Βοιωτιουργές as being a noteworthy article. And Aelian (Claudius), in his *Various History* (iii. 24), has this comment to make: λέγεται οὖν ὁ τοῦ Γρύλλου τὴν μὲν ἀσπίδα Ἀργολικὴν ἔχειν, τὸν δὲ θώρακα Ἀττικόν, τὸ δὲ κράνος Βοιωτιουργές, τὸν δὲ ἵππον Ἐπιδαύριον.

But both Pollux and Aelian are surely but echoing our passage in the *Hippike*. Hence, with so little literary evidence available, we are obliged to make the most of Xenophon's words.¹

We have nothing in the more imposing departments of Greek art which will cast light on the problem, and an examination of the smaller artistic objects yields but barren or negative results. Thus, in the case of engraved gems, we find that the helmet or the helmeted head was by no means a favorite *motif* with the engravers. Sporadic examples, indeed, do occur; but the casques shown are largely of the later and ornate Syro-Macedonian, Gallic, and Roman types,² while the older styles differ in no respect from the conventional so-called Corinthian and Attic models (Figs. 4 and 5).

Nor is the case different when we come to consider the terracotta figurines. Statuettes of warriors or of helmet-bearing heads are of comparatively rare occurrence, particularly so in the case of such as are of Boeotian provenance. Nothing distinctive is to be observed in the samples which we have. Thus, we see the Corinthian and Attic styles, the Phrygian cap and a variety of late types, together with many specimens of the well known *pilos*.³

¹S. Reinach, in his article on helmets in the dictionary of Daremberg and Saglio, is authority for the statement (p. 1445) that the Boeotian helmet was worn by the *Hetairoi*, or cavalry bodyguard of Alexander the Great. He cites Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, i. 15, 5, as evidence—erroneously however, as there is no reference to the Boeotian helmet in this passage, or indeed in any part of the work.

²See Furtwängler, *Ant. Gem.*, i. pls. xxviii, xxix, xxxiii.

³See Winter, *Typen d. fig. Terrak.*, i. pp. 44, 179, 180; ii. pp. 176, 387.

Unfortunately, for our purpose, the field of the Boeotian coinage is so monopolized by the well known shield *motif* that coins bearing the helmet as a type are found but rarely. Only four varieties of different mintage have come down to us which have this emblem. These range in date from the middle of the fifth to the middle of the third centuries B. C. Three are stamped with likenesses of the Corinthian (Fig. 4) and two with likenesses of the Attic (Fig. 5) helmet;¹ but of anything of the nature of a distinctively Boeotian helmet, we have absolutely no trace.

Thus far our results have been almost solely of a negative character, and as such would throw doubt on the very existence of any distinct and individual Boeotian type of helmet, possessing a form essentially different from those already known. In view of this situation, it is necessary for us to revert to the citation from Xenophon.

One is forced to accept the conclusion that scholars generally have failed to read the passage with close attention and have, in particular, slighted the exact form and connotation of the adjective *Βοιωτιουργές* which Xenophon uses in conjunction with the noun *κράνος*. Elsewhere we have such common expressions as *ἀσπίς Ἀργολική* and *θώραξ Ἀττικός*. Why, therefore, does the historian herd introduce the somewhat curious term *Βοιωτιουργές* in place of *Βοιώτιον*? The answer, manifestly, is not far to seek. The clear-thinking and practical-minded soldier is certainly not here guilty of bringing in a rare compound word in place of a simple adjective for purely stylistic effect. He employs it for the obvious reason that it clearly expresses his meaning, which is "of Boeotian manufacture" or "made in Boeotia." We are not justified in wresting the Greek so as to force it to yield any other idea. The term *Βοιωτιουργές*, therefore, no more denoted the existence of a purely Boeotian type than did the familiar (until recent times) legend "Made in Germany" mark an article of merchandise as invented or patented in that country. This interpretation of our author would serve to explain the fruitless nature of our quest for the Boeotian type elsewhere.

¹See *Brit. Mus. Cat., Central Greece*, pls. vi. vii. xii.

It is, however, obvious that, while Xenophon is willing to credit the Boeotians with the employment of excellent processes in the forging and shaping of this cavalry-helmet, he must have, at the same time, some definite and specific form of headpiece in mind. Otherwise he would have been obliged to stop short of any description. We must therefore examine closely the latter part of his statement. This Boeotian-made helmet, he says, satisfies two requirements: It serves to protect, as far as possible, the wearer's head and neck, and it does not tend to obstruct his outlook. In other words, the casque constitutes the best possible mean between perfect protection and perfect freedom of view. Necessarily, it must be borne in mind that the Greeks were altogether unacquainted with the use of the barred vizor which distinguished the helmets of the mediæval knights, and the word γείσων, ordinarily translated "vizor," was regularly merely a projecting flange of metal which shaded the forehead to about the extent of the beak of the modern military cap. Nor is it to be expected that the helmet would fit down on the shoulders as it often did in the Middle Ages. It is evident that Xenophon, by the mention of a στέγασμα which rises from the upper part of the cuirass has already made provision for the protection—at least, partial—of the throat and neck of the rider¹

There seems to be no possible conclusion other than that the helmet advocated by Xenophon, while of Boeotian manufacture, is merely one of the types well known to contemporary Greeks, but one satisfying the requirement cited by the historian—that of preserving a mean between complete protection and complete freedom of outlook. Let us examine the existing styles of the fourth century B. C. in the light of this prescription.

The *pilos* (Fig. 6) we may dismiss immediately, as it constitutes an altogether inefficient form of cavalry-headpiece. It is little more than a skull-cap, as already noted, designed to guard the head against the downward cut of a broadsword or the blow of a mace, but of doubtful service (except in a retreat) against missiles or the short easily wielded swords of the Greeks. The popularity of the *pilos*

¹*Hippike*, xii. 2.

is undoubtedly due to the heat of the Greek climate, which must have rendered very irksome the wearing of a helmet which tended to "box in" the whole head.

The Corinthian type (Fig. 4)—so-called from its frequent occurrence on the coins of Corinth—furnishes an excellent covering for the entire head and face with the exception of the eyes; but, on the other hand, its form, very obviously, tended to obstruct the line of vision of the wearer, particularly if the helmet became in the slightest degree disturbed from its normal position. Xenophon must certainly have had the Corinthian type in mind when he used the words: ὁρᾶν δὲ οὐ κωλύει. For of all the types known at this time the Corinthian tends most to interfere with the outlook. Such indeed is its nature—both from this feature and from its close fit—that it could never have been worn in the logical position except when the wearer was actively engaged in fighting, and in the vase-paintings we usually find it pushed back, exposing the face of the warrior. In later times, moreover—though the fact is not generally known—the Corinthian in some quarters degenerated into a smaller form of helmet which could not be drawn over the face, but was always worn on the top of the head, the part originally protecting the jaws now serving as the vizor. The truth of this is made manifest through actually surviving specimens of the type and by the nature of a fair number of representations in Greek art.

The only other style that could have been popular in the age of Xenophon was the Attic (Fig. 5), which has received its name from the frequency of its occurrence on Athenian coins. This seems to have been the prototype of the Roman legionary helmet, and it constituted what might be termed a good "all-round" headpiece, though it was in no sense of the word a distinctively cavalry-helm; the knight, by the very nature of the case, can wear a much heavier suit of armor than can the infantryman. The Attic helmet is relatively light, and except in such cases where it is furnished with a long (or occasionally movable) vizor and with cheek-pieces, it is of little more merit as a protection than is the *pilos*. It is to be noted that the helmet is a difficult objec-

tive for a spearman; even the professional lancers of mediæval times preferred not to attempt to strike it with the spear point. Furthermore, there is abundant evidence to show that the Greeks regularly used their swords broadsword-fashion. The rapier-thrust seems to have been unknown, though the swords were sometimes used for stabbing, dagger-fashion, but naturally only at very close quarters. So, what the Greek cavalryman had to guard against, next to wounds on the trunk, was a slashing blow which would fall between clavicle and ear, where a very slight cut was liable to reach carotid or jugular and thus prove almost immediately fatal. The ordinary Attic helmet was powerless to grant protection against a stroke of this nature.

One other once widely popular type must have been at least known to Xenophon, though from the evidence of the vase-paintings one would be inclined to think that it had been discarded before the end of the fifth century. I refer to an older form of the Corinthian helm, from which the Corinthian proper developed, sometimes known as the helmet of Diomedes (Fig. 7). It seems doubtful if it ever went entirely out of use, and, in any case, there must have been many extant specimens in the early fourth century. Now, this type alone, of all those known to us by surviving examples or in art, will exactly fit the description of Xenophon. With its close-fitting cap, its rigid and projecting cheek-pieces and its neck-guard at the sides and back, the helmet of Diomedes served to protect almost completely the head of the wearer. At the same time, the line of vision is not obstructed. The eye-holes are considerably larger and cut farther back than we find them in the case of the Corinthian proper; the nose-guard is regularly, though not invariably, lacking; and the cheek-pieces are parted, so as not to interfere with the breathing. Indeed, it is hard to conceive of a better compromise between complete protection and an unobstructed line of vision than we here find. This type also is very frequently found on the heads of mounted men in the vase-paintings, and a comparison of it with the helmets worn by the knights in the Middle Ages



FIG. 4 — LONDON, BRITISH MUSEUM: BOEOTIAN BRONZE COIN OF UNCERTAIN MINTAGE, OBVERSE

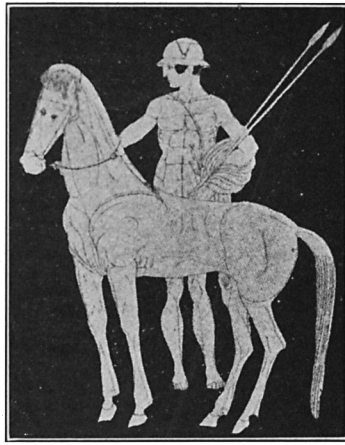


FIG. 6—PARIS, LOUVRE: DETAIL FROM THE ARGONAUT CRATER FROM ORVIETO



FIG. 5 — LONDON, BRITISH MUSEUM: BOEOTIAN SILVER COIN OF CORONEIA, REVERSE (enlarged)



FIG. 7 — DETAIL FROM AN ARCHAIC VASE FORMERLY AT A ROMAN DEALER'S (AFTER GERHARD, *Auserlesene griechische Vasenbilder*, pl. CCLVIII, 2)

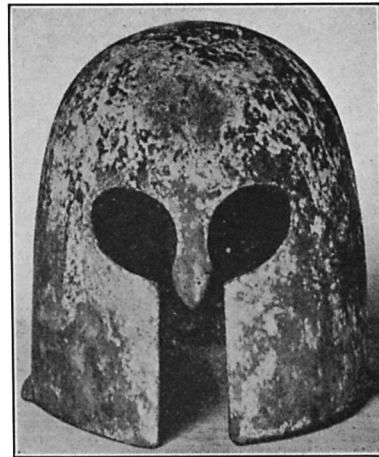


FIG. 8 — PHILADELPHIA, UNIVERSITY MUSEUM: HELMET

shows, I think, that of all the types invented and worn by the Greeks¹ it comes nearest to the ideal cavalry helmet.

Such must have been the general form of the helmet of which Xenophon provides such a tantalizingly meagre description. It may have departed from the older style in non-essential details, but these variations could have been in no case so radical as to have constituted the setting up of an essentially new and distinct type. I am inclined on the whole, to identify the form of the Boeotian-made helmet with that of a specimen in the University Museum, Philadelphia, recently published by Luce in *The Museum Journal*² (Fig. 8). This example seems to meet the requirements of Xenophon's description in every particular, with the possible exception of the presence of a nose-guard. The casque is somewhat low and squat in appearance, and would have been of about the proper depth to meet the upper rim of the *στέγασμα* rising above the *θώραξ*. The eye-holes are unusually large, while the separation of the jaw-pieces assures a free respiration—something of great moment in the case of the horseman. The helmet is dated by Luce about 600 B. C. While this may be correct, the absence of a crest would appear to me to indicate a later date. In the history of armor, it appears almost certain that the crest is a device of as early invention as is the helmet itself, if indeed not earlier. Apparently, the primitive warrior equips himself with a crest in battle, partly for its psychological effect on the enemy, partly for reasons intimately connected with the principle of homœopathic magic. With hairy crest, like that of the lion or the wild boar, he deems himself to have become a veritable representative of these formidable creatures. For this reason, no less than from the weighty evidence of the vase-paintings, we seem justified in assuming that the crestless helmet was a somewhat late invention. It may be noted that extant specimens of a type strikingly like that shown in Fig. 8—crestless, and of similar shape—have been thought by some scholars to have been worn by the Macedonian troops of Alexander the Great.

¹Cf., e. g., Ffoulkes, *Armour and Weapons*, pl. iv.

²xi (1920), no. i. p. 71 f.; fig. 44.

If many circumstances seem to point to the form of the helmet of Diomede as being the one recommended by Xenophon, the historical situation, also, is perhaps not without its significance in explaining why the specific word "Boeotian" should have been associated with the helmet by the historian. It is generally agreed among scholars that the treatise on horsemanship was composed about 362 B. C., the year which marked the downfall of the Theban supremacy and saw the death of Xenophon's own son, Gryllus, in a cavalry-engagement against the Boeotians. Now, we learn from Arrian¹ and others that Epaminondas, the Theban military genius, had during the preceding decade introduced important innovations into the Theban army, affecting both tactics and armor. There is nothing more likely than that he should have equipped his cavalry—an important arm of the Boeotian service—with the best style of armor available, which would seem to include a helmet of the type described. There is nothing to suggest that he invented any new style of cavalry-helmet; a revival of the helmet of Diomede would be his next-best course. Xenophon of course, was perfectly familiar with Theban affairs and must have had intimate knowledge of the activities of Epaminondas. It appears, therefore, very probable that he should have referred to the revived helmet of Diomede, which probably had at that time no particular name, as the "Boeotian-made" helmet.

¹*Ars Tactica*, 11.